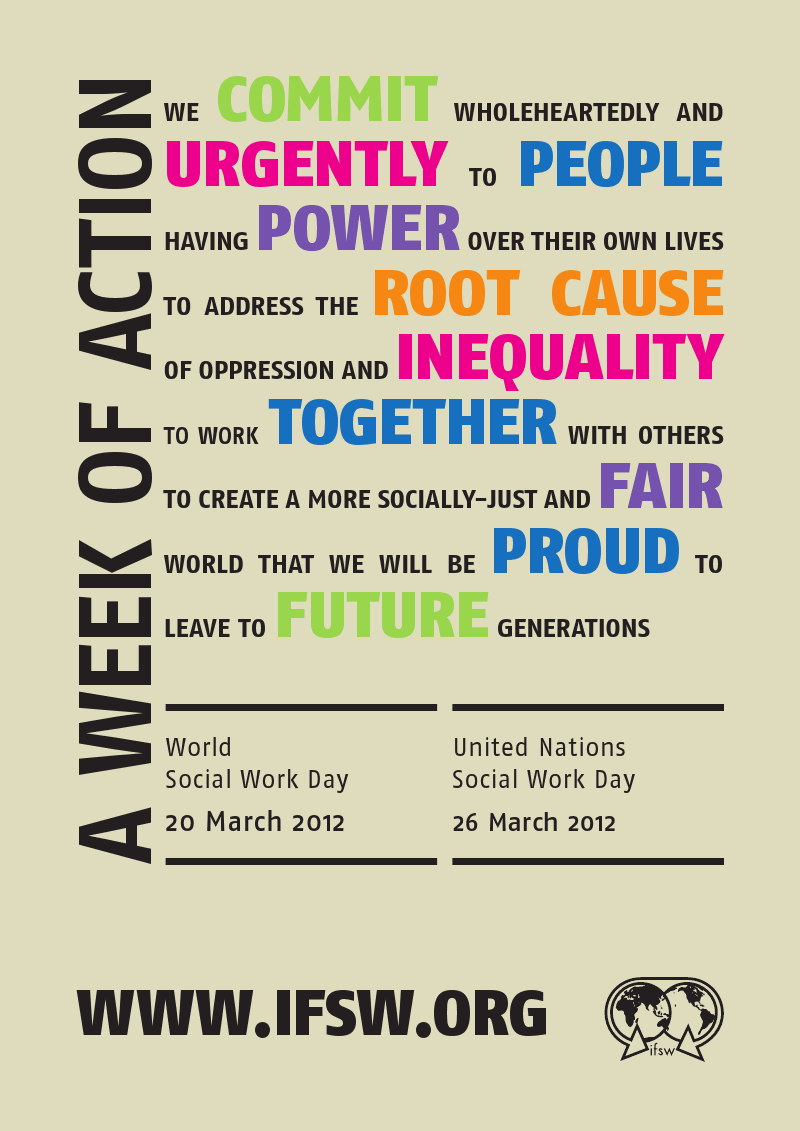
GROUP HOME AWARENESS

**BY MADISON DILL**

[](http://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=social+work&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&docid=FCosb3XTcrA-JM&tbnid=s9JTokAOFJ-14M:&ved=0CAUQjRw&url=http://craftzillaconquerstheworld.blogspot.com/2012/03/blog-positivity-week-and-world-social.html&ei=VvZQUavcOOHe0QH9koGICg&bvm=bv.44158598,d.dmg&psig=AFQjCNFLZtoDMZjMSj37UA67pbty_MhBjw&ust=1364346726717411)

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**BACKGROUND**

**What is a group home for troubled teenagers?**

A group home is a 24-hour care facility with live in caregivers, in a home-like setting. They are community based organizations that seek to help troubled or disabled individuals, most often between the ages of 12 and 18.

**Why do teenagers go into these group homes?**

Parents, social workers, and/or judges may place troubled or struggling teenagers into group homes in cases such as: the child has been a victim of abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), pathological lying, depressed, at-risk, suicidal, teen pregnancy, runaway, juvenile delinquency, drug use, violent streaks, and/or gang involvement.

**What are the goals of this type of group home?**

The goals of these group homes are to provide individual and group therapy, improve teenagers’ social skills, deal with/eliminate addictions and fears, and assist teenagers in getting the necessary medical treatment they may need. (Some group homes are religiously based.)

**ASSOCIATED STEREOTYPES**

**While others have argued that the teenagers in group homes are “worthless” or “cannot be helped”,** there are plenty of success stories involving them. The judgmental views from the public toward teenagers, who are in need of help, causes

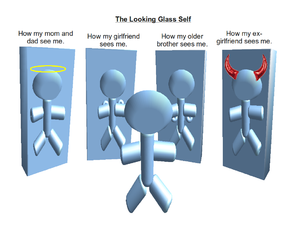
1"Craftzilla Conquers the World." *: Blog Positivity Week and World Social Worker's Day*

a social stigma and/or stereotype to be attached with those involved, which doesn’t benefit the teenagers or the group home workers.

Some researchers have suggested that being labeled with a certain social stigma and/or stereotype will cause the targeted group to believe, and live as though, that negative aspect truly is a part of them.

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In 1902, Charles Horton Cooley’s idea of the **Looking-Glass Self**2 became evident. It is the sociological concept that suggests that a person’s own concept of ‘self’ comes from society’s interpersonal interactions and perceptions. This means that the way that society sees and reacts to people actually shapes the way all people view themselves. This concept can be simplified into three basic steps: 1. person imagines how society sees him/her; 2. person interprets society’s reaction; and 3. person develops ‘self-concept’.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_looking_glass_self.png)Another concept that is similar to Cooley’s Looking-Glass Self is **Labeling Theory**3; which is defined as “the belief that individuals subconsciously notice how others see or label them, and their reactions to those labels, over time, form the basis of their self-identity.”

An example of this is discussed in Dalton Conley’s Sociology Textbook. Victor Rios’s (Assistant Professor, UC Santa Barbara) book, *Punished: Policing the Lines of Black and Latino Boys*, exemplifies this theory:

“Rios examines the way the current aggressive policing strategies have effectively criminalized young boys in poor neighborhoods. Police and parole officers are stationed in schools and community centers, the spaces in which education and mentoring traditionally occur,

2 Cooley, Charles Horton. “*Human Nature and the Social Order.”*

3 Conley, Dalton. "Chapter 6: Social Control and Deviance." *You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking like a Sociologist*.

4 "Looking Glass Self." *Wikipedia*.

creating a self-fulfilling prophecy where teens are assumed to be criminals, treated with suspicion bordering on aggression, and watched closely until caught in some criminal act. Is flooding crime-ridden neighborhoods with aggressive policing the right thing to do, sending enforcement to areas where criminal activity is concentrated? Or does sending more police to a neighborhood simply increase the number of people who get caught, closing routes out of that neighborhood by saddling folks with criminal records?”

His work suggests that the effect of young boys being labeled a deviant or criminal was that they, in return, act like a deviant or criminal.

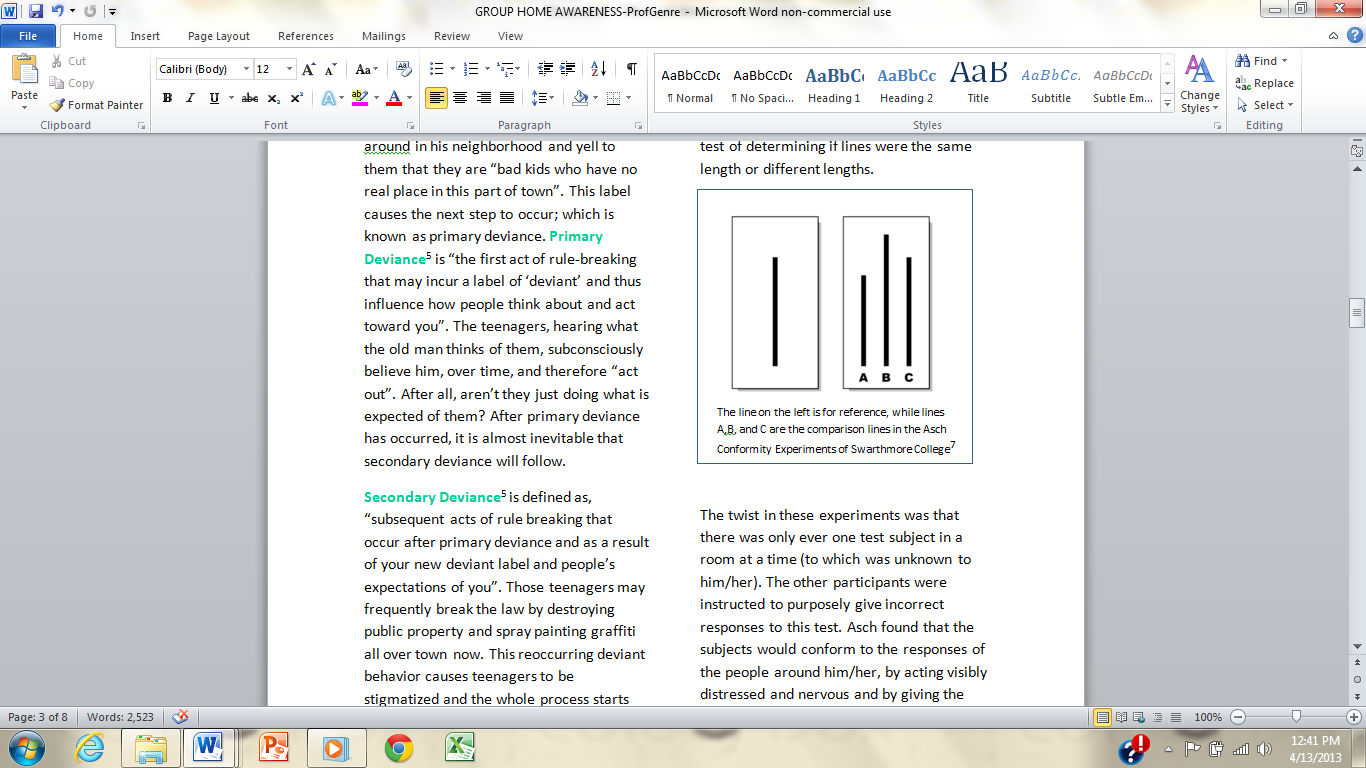
It’s a process that is interconnected within itself. First, a label is bestowed upon teenagers. For example, an elderly man could see a group of teenagers walking around in his neighborhood and yell to them that they are, “bad kids who have no real place in this part of town”. This label causes the next step to occur; which is known as primary deviance. **Primary Deviance**5is “the first act of rule-breaking that may incur a label of ‘deviant’ and thus influence how people think about and act toward you”. The teenagers, hearing what the old man thinks of them, subconsciously believe him, over time, and therefore “act out”. After all, aren’t they just doing what is expected of them? After primary deviance has occurred, it is almost inevitable that secondary deviance will follow.

**Secondary Deviance**5 is defined as, “subsequent acts of rule breaking that occur after primary deviance and as a result of your new deviant label and people’s expectations of you”. Those teenagers may frequently break the law by destroying public property and spray painting graffiti all over town now. This reoccurring deviant behavior causes teenagers to be stigmatized and the whole process starts over again. That makes you think, doesn’t it? What have you personally done or said that could have caused such behavior?

It is almost impossible to argue that a person can act differently from how others

5 Conley, Dalton. "Chapter 6: pp. 177+. " *You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking like a Sociologist*.

view them because people are proven to conform to others’ opinions.

In the late 1940’s the **Solomon Asch Comformity Experiments**6 were conducted. The subjects believed to be taking a vision test to determine if lines were the same length or different lengths.

[](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-j9gzbilpp6w/TdTaZKDGI6I/AAAAAAAAADg/n__pQ-Xisug/s1600/stereotype+1.jpg)

The twist in these experiments was that there was only ever **one** test subject in a room at a time (to which was unknown to him/her). The other participants were instructed to purposely give incorrect responses to this test. Asch found that the subjects would conform to the responses of the people around him/her, by acting visibly distressed and nervous and by giving the wrong responses as well. The results show the power of conformity within groups. The most amazing aspect about these results, was that the subjects conformed to the opinions of complete strangers!!

It was also tested: if a friend/acquaintance of the subject was in the room, and offered the correct response; if just one other person would agree with the test subject; or if the subject was permitted to write down his/her responses—he/she would answer correctly without conformity.

So if society labels teenagers as “worthless” they are going to eventually view themselves as being worthless. This theory

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6 Conley, Dalton. "Chapter 6: pp. 154." *You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking like a Sociologist*.

7 Asch Conformity Experiments." *Wikipedia*.

8"My Life and My World." *: Stereotype. Good or Bad?*

explains why adolescents are hesitant to seeking help and it also gives those facilities that assist those targeted groups to gain a bad reputation. STOP labeling them!!

**RESPONSE**

Reading other researchers’ perspectives can be very informative but not necessarily be clearly applicable to everyday lives. For instance, if your (or surrounding network’s) opinion doesn’t reflect the views of the previous research then addressing this problem becomes an issue when the public doesn’t realize that there is, in fact, a stereotyping issue at hand. This problem is seen as an issue of ignorance on the subject. This ignorance could be a result of fear, selfishness, pride, or the way people were raised—what they were taught to believe and what experiences they had been sheltered from.

Conducting new research or surveys on this subject is an effective way to learn how much society knows and/or care about teenagers in need of some help. The survey includes questions regarding; importance, numbers, and labeling.

While Victor Rio’s research has concentrated on the effects on young boys from policing strategies in schools, labeling theory concisely explains how stereotypes do cause teenagers to act out against the ‘norm’, and primary and secondary deviance *do* exist; these concepts are not common-knowledge in the public perspective.

A few survey questions were asked to a group a people in regards to this issue. This response differs from previous responses because it deals with the human interaction aspect; rather than a study on the troubled teenagers, themselves, or just the amount of knowledge possessed by society. It was to show the connection to the subject (or lack thereof).

It was not so much a way to disclose what people actually know, but more of a way to show what society *doesn’t* know/understand; a way to expose the ignorance that exists without them having knowledge of these pre-conceived ideas about teenagers who sought help from public assistance programs (including group homes for troubled teenagers).

The research conducted will show if a correlation exists between how much people care about the well-being of teenagers and how much people actually know about the amount of help these teenagers need.

This short survey was asked through Facebook messages and one-on-one conversations. After the data was collected the results were converted to chart form so they could be interpreted easily.

**RESULTS**

Seventeen people were asked their opinions about group homes for troubled teenagers and what they believed to be true about adolescents in ‘out-of-home care’ in the U.S. For the purpose of this research, **three survey questions were generated and the results are as follows:**

The first question was, **“How important, on a scale from one to five, are group homes for troubled teenagers?”** (one being not very important and five being the most important). When asked this, most people **(35.30%)** ranked group homes for troubled teenagers as the highest importance; meaning they ranked it as five.

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**0.00% of respondents gave the correct answer (e).**

Secondly, the survey asked, **“On any given** **day, how many children are in ‘out-of home care’ in the U.S.?”** (the multiple choice answers included: (a) fewer than 100,000; (b) 250,000; (c) 325,000; (d) 400,000; and (e) more than 500,000). When inquired about this piece of information, none **(0.00%)** of the respondents gave the correct response. According to **www.childrensrights.org**, approximately 400,000 children are in this type of system, each day.

9 "Facts About Foster Care." *Childrens Rights RSS*.

The final question, **“How much, on a scale from 1 to 5, do you think labeling teenagers as “worthless” affects how they view themselves and the amount of help they seek?”** This question regarded Labeling Theory and the corresponding effects; **88.20%** believe that labeling teenagers can definitely change the way they view themselves and re-think getting some assistance for their problems (whether they be social, behavioral, physical, etc.)

These findings built off of the actual effects these stereotypes have on teenagers. They also conveyed how much people don’t understand, in regards to troubled teenagers. These results are not very surprising, for the most part. They confirm that there is a correlation between society members caring and their lack of knowledge.

Based on the third question of the survey, which was about labeling and its affects, one can realize that labeling teenagers with a negative connotation will reflect within individuals. Teenagers could become withdrawn from society, depressed, resort to drug use or alcoholism, and many other issues faced by our society’s adolescents.

One can interpret from this short survey’s outcome that society remains ignorant to adolescent issues. Society needs to comprehend the actual amount of teenagers that need help in order to be able to understand how much more help should be offered and how to treat them. Show them respect and support versus rejection and contempt.

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The opposite effect could be used here to make a positive difference in these teenagers’ circumstances. This means, motivate them through positive comments but this does not mean to just “label” them in a different way. Just encourage them, but not their behavior. Let them know that society supports their (and their families’) decision to gain some help from an outside source, like a group home for troubled teenagers.

The outcome of this short survey reflects that society clearly cares about the teenagers that are in group homes and/or need the help that group homes and other out-of home care can provide. If the explanations and way group homes address individual issues, regarding the teenagers themselves, are tailored to be understandable by all groups of people, then the awareness of this issue, of labeling those teenagers, needs to be handled in the same manner. Besides, how can people stop this behavior if they don’t realize there is something wrong with way they are behaving towards these teenagers?

**BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES**

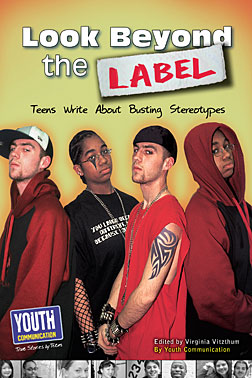
**Stop labeling or stereotyping the teenagers that are being treated in group homes;** before they are emitted and after they are released. So what can be done about this problem?

For starters, **increase awareness of this issue by word of mouth**. Talk to people that you know; friends, family, co-workers, etc. and explain what the potential reasons for teenagers being in group homes could be. People tend to conform to the general theory that “ignorance is bliss”; “what you don’t know won’t hurt you”. The truth is, that’s probably correct, but that information that society isn’t aware of, is hurting some teenager somewhere. That joke about how worthless that boy is cuts like a knife in his heart, that degrading comment about her makes her want to hang herself. Our words matter, they can hurt; but our words don’t have to be meaningless. We can use our voices to stand up for what is right and “just” in this world. We can speak against the abuse and violence and try to make a difference, even if it is just for one teenager. That one teenager matters.

A more active and/or public solution would be to **organize awareness groups that distribute information** about group homes.

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Make brochures, signs, banners, or billboards that advertise group homes that effectively inform the public what their function is and how they can help the troubled teenagers of our societies. Positive reinforcement of these services will benefit specific group homes and those teenagers in need of some help.

The very idea, of the public supporting these teenagers, could be the motivation they had been looking for; to encourage them to admit their problems/issues and finally ask for the help they had avoided for such a long time. It could also help reassure parents that admitting their teenager into a group home could be very beneficial to the whole family. Social workers could become more persuaded to place teenagers in one of these group homes that he/she thinks could be a good “fit” for that specific teenager; but social workers need to be aware of what each group home for troubled teenagers offers in order to make an informed decision about the welfare of the adolescent. This proposed solution is not meant to be complicated, it’s actually quite simple. There are a group of teenagers seeking help and that is a social problem; one to be dealt with on a personal basis. Therefore, the solution and the way to go about resolving this issue should be on a more personal and simplistic level as well. This problem is not about the economy or money. It is solely a matter of realizing that stigmas do, in fact, affect groups of people and that stopping these stereotypes would allow specific groups of people to be able to move on and progress in their everyday lives.

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**This book was written by Youth Communication and edited by Virginia Vitzthum.**

The function of group homes is to shield, ignore, and/or overcome these stereotypes to better improve the lives of these teenagers.

10 "She Takes on the World Â» Five Reasons Why a Mentor Is Vital for Successful Women Entrepreneurs."

11 "Youth Communication E-Store:." *Youth Communication E-Store.*

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